

## **That Your Joy May be Complete**

John 16:17-24 By Patty Friesen (Aug.2/15)

The Boston Globe carried a story of a most unusual wedding banquet. Accompanied by her fiancé, a woman went to the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Boston and ordered the banquet. The two of them pored over the menu, made selections of china and silver, and pointed to pictures of the flower arrangements they liked. They both had expensive taste, and the bill came to thirteen thousand dollars. After leaving a check for half that amount as down payment, the couple went home to flip through books of wedding announcements.

The day the announcements were supposed to hit the mailbox, the potential groom got cold feet. "I'm just not sure," he said. "It's a big commitment. Let's think about this a little longer." When his angry fiancée returned to the Hyatt to cancel the banquet, the Events Manager could not have been more understanding. "The same thing happened to me, Honey," she said, and told the story of her own broken engagement. But about the refund, she had bad news. "The contract is binding. You're only entitled to thirteen hundred dollars back. You have two options: to forfeit the rest of the down payment, or go ahead with the banquet. I'm sorry. Really, I am."

It seemed crazy, but the more the jilted bride thought about it, the more she liked the idea of going ahead with the party – not a wedding banquet, mind you, but a big blowout. Ten years before, this same woman had been living in a homeless shelter. She had got back on her feet, found a good job, and set aside a sizable nest egg. Now she had the wild notion of using her savings to treat the down –and-outs of Boston to a night on the town.

And so it was that in June of 1990 the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Boston hosted a party such as it had never seen before. The hostess changed the menu to boneless chicken – “in honor of the groom,” she said – and sent invitations to rescue missions and homeless shelters. That warm summer night, people who were used to peeling half-gnawed pizza off cardboard dined instead on chicken cordon bleu. Hyatt waiters in tuxedos served hors d’oeuvres to senior citizens propped up by crutches and aluminum walkers. Bag ladies, vagrants, and addicts took one night off from the hard life on the sidewalks outside and sipped champagne, ate chocolate wedding cake and danced to big-band melodies late into the night. (Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*)

John 16 describes joy as the hallmark of our life in the Holy Spirit and John who is supposed to be rather anti-female describes this joy in the profound metaphor of labour and delivery. When a woman is in labour, she has pain because her hour has come but when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice and no one will take your joy from you.

Unfortunately we Christians are known more for our judgment than our joy. CS Lewis describes his discovery of God as being Surprised by Joy in his memoir by that title. His best translation of joy was the idea of Sehnsucht, German for longing and fulfillment of this longing but this joy was so intense it could not be explained with words. He describes it as being struck with stabs of joy throughout his life. Struck with stabs of joy - that we could all see our lives in this way. When Lewis makes the leap from atheism to Christianity, he realizes that Joy is like a signpost to those lost in the woods, pointing the way. His book had no connection to his unexpected marriage later in

life to Joy Gresham but his friends were not slow to notice the coincidence, frequently remarking that Lewis had really been Surprised by Joy.

If stabs of joy define our life in Christ, then a joyless religion is not faithful. And joyless churches and families are missing the Holy Spirit. Alan Cumming, host of Public Television's Masterpiece Theatre for British drama fans says in his memoir that his family was joyless. "Everything we felt joy in had to be hidden or suppressed. Being able to express joy was something that took me a long time to be confident enough to do." Families and churches that play together, stay together.

Joyful celebration is an invitation to set aside time that does not have an agenda or a goal attached to it. We benefit when we pause to honor and enjoy the present moment and those relationships that touch our lives. Setting time aside to honor a relationship, commemorate an event or enjoy a walk in the country helps to reconnect us to dimensions of life which are lasting.

Some North American visitors were assisting El Salvadoran people in their efforts to rebuild their village in a war-ravaged area. When the Salvadorans began to plan a whole day of celebration, the Americans chastised them for taking time out for a party in the midst of such need and urgency. The Salvadoran's answer was based on many years of struggle made it clear that celebration was important for their own wellbeing. They replied, "It's clear that you are not in this for the long haul."

Joy and celebration that grows out of our own life experiences brings with it a message of hope. It empowers. To stop and enjoy the moment at hand gives perspective, helps one to prioritize and to see new possibilities. Celebration gives encouragement and restores confidence in the struggle at hand. Celebration is a grace note that punctuates

our day and our life with meaning and encouragement. Celebration is for remembering not forgetting; for raising up not drowning out; for lingering over not rushing by; for savoring one thing well rather than sampling many; for enjoying without having to possess; for experiencing the genuine rather than escaping into the artificial and spirit numbing experiences that abound in our culture.

Taking the scriptures to heart about joyful celebrating with outsiders, John Carlson, a Lutheran minister in Minnesota was fed up with the infamous Senior High School Prom, with dates, expensive outfits, pictures, limos, fancy dinner and dancing – the heartbreaking event of North American teenagers who can't afford the party or can't get a date. He had it with the notion of a Prom for the Pretty and Popular and he started what he called the Reject Prom. You were not allowed to have a date to go to the Reject Prom and there was no alcohol. It was the same night as the traditional prom but turned out to be a real blowout party that outshone the traditional prom. Each year the Reject Prom grew and gained publicity. Timex gave watches to the kids who attended and soon other businesses got on the bandwagon, giving out interesting gifts and souvenirs. Soon the popular kids were opting to go to the Reject Prom. Joy is like that.

God wants us to be joyful and reminds us of whom we are supposed to be joyful with. Ours is a vertical and horizontal religion. Our thanksgiving heavenward is expressed outwards towards others because God wants us to pass on the joy that has been given to us. Anyone who reads the Old Testament will find a God who desires to give us the best and bless us as long as we share it with the marginal in our midst. Anybody who reads the New Testament will discover a Jesus who loved to party with publicans and all kinds of left-out people. The lepers of society found in Him someone who would eat and

drink with them. And while the solemnly pious could not relate to what He was about, those lonely people who usually didn't get invited to parties took to Him with excitement.

Our Jesus was and is the Lord of Joy.

Let's pray: Our God who gives us more than we ask for or imagine, whether we deserve it or not, help us to receive the abundance of your joy that we may be so overwhelmed by it that our hearts are softened toward others and we pour out the same joy that you have given to us. Amen.